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AUTHOR Thompson, Edgar H.
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ABSTRACT

While discouraging using writing as punishment, this pamphlet shows how writing can be a tool to support learning. The pamphlet discusses the following ten ways that writing can be used in any school subject to enhance learning and to develop students' thinking processes: (1) to identify personal goals, (2) to comprehend reading material, (3) to clarify and reflect, (4) to define one's own learning, (5) to summarize, (6) to apply writing to practical school situations, (7) to inquire, (8) to plan and organize, (9) to meet one's own needs and interests, and (10) to evaluate. (EL)

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WRITING AS LEARNING, NOT AS PUNISHMENT

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VATE
Virginia Association of Teachers of English

THE RESOLUTION

At the Fall 1984 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Convention, several members raised the issue that writing was still being used in various schools across the country to punish students. Since such punishment negates the efforts of English teachers to reduce students' fear of writing and to teach students that writing is an important tool for learning, the NCTE membership adopted the following resolution:

> that NCTE discourage teachers, administrators, and others from making a punishment of such writing as copywork, sentence repetition, original paragraphs and themes, and other assignments which inhibit desired attitudes and essential communication skills.

The Virginia Association of Teachers of English (VATE), an affiliate of NCTE, also endorses this resolution.

USING WRITING TO PUNISH

We would like to think that few students in this country engage in activities like the one pictured on the cover of this brochure. Even so, many educators still use writing as a form of punishment. Students may be asked to write lengthy papers on a variety of topics from "Why I Won't Smoke in the Rest Room Again" to "Why I Didn't Do My Homework." Here the punishment <u>is</u> writing. When this association occurs, teachers who encourage writing in their classrooms find it difficult to convince students that writing can support and enhance their learning.

There are times when writing can legitimately be used where punishment is involved. For instance, if a teacher or a principal asks two students to write a personal account of an event that got them into trouble, such a piece of writing is appropriate. Students are writing for a real audience with a real purpose. Here the writing is reflective and persuasive and may lead to a resolution of the problem. The writing itself is <u>not</u> the punishment.

USING WRITING TO SUPPORT LEARNING

VATE encourages teachers in all disciplines to think carefully before asking students to write in punitive situations. If the writing in such situations becomes a form of punishment, the negative long-range effect on students' attitudes towards learning and writing may far outweigh the potential short-term behavior modification.

Writing can, however, be used as a tool to support learning. Denny Wolfe and Carol Pope ("Developing Thinking Processes: Ten Writing-For-Learning Tasks Throughout the Curriculum." <u>Virginia English Bulletin</u> 35.1 (1985): 11-17) identify ten generic ways that writing can be used in any school subject to enhance learning and to develop students' thinking processes.

1. Writing To Identify Personal Goals

> "At the beginning of a term (a semester or a grading period)--even at the beginning of a week--teachers might ask students to write down several goals which they hope to achieve during that period of time. . . . The goals should address school-related matters, focusing on academic learning" (12).

2. Writing To Comprehend Reading Material

> "Students should be encouraged to write, to digest, to paraphrase, and to interpret what they read. . . . Both during and after reading, students should write to explore and make their own meanings from the printed pages" (13).

3. Writing To Clarify and Reflect

> "During any classroom learning activity . . . , teachers might periodically ask students to stop what they are doing in order to write for purposes of clarifying and reflecting. . . . [Students] write to reflect upon what they have done, heard, said, or seen, and upon what lies ahead in a particular learning activity" (13).

4. Writing To Define One's Own Learning

> "At the beginning of a lesson or a class, students might be asked to write to remember, to select, and to record what they feel was their most important learning about a given lesson or subject the day before. By focusing attention on previous learning, this kind of writing prepares students for what is coming next" (13).

5. Writing To Summarize

> "Writing summaries means, for example, writing to indicate the structural plot of a story; the most significant information in a textbook chapter or magazine or newspaper article; the major message or point in an essay; the nugget of a lecture, a record, or a tape recording; the visual story line of a film; the hard-won discovery of a laboratory experiment; or the essence of an oral discussion in the classroom. . . . What [Wolfe and Pope] are suggesting here is (1) [that students write] summaries far more frequently than is currently the case and (2) [write] summaries for learning purposes rather than solely for testing purposes" (14).

6. Writing To Apply

> "Teachers [should] ask students to write about the practical value of their learning. . . . This writing task occasionally can place the onus on students to speculate about the utility of what they learn in school. As a result of such writing--if it becomes the basis now and then for classroom discussion--teachers might discover new reasons for what they are teaching. Conversely, teachers

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might also discover that something they are teaching deserves a much lower (or higher) priority" (14).

7. Writing To Inquire

"Students will not learn to develop curious, inquiring minds if they are not urged--even pressed--to ask questions. . . . Stopping what students are doing . . . and asking them to write a question tends to elicit many responses. The questions might have to do with (1) something students do not understand; (2) something they would like to know more about; (3) a speculation about a relationship between what they are working on now and something they have done in the past; or (4) a need to have clarified the purpose regarding why they are doing a particular activity" (15).

8. Writing To Plan and Organize

"Teachers can urge students to prepare weekly plans or schedules, indicating what tasks lie ahead and how students propose to manage their time and energies to get their work done well. . . . Gradually, many students will learn to depend upon such writing to discover the details of what needs to be done and the best procedures for doing it" (15).

9. Writing To Meet One's Own Needs and Interests

"Perhaps once a week, teachers can invite students to spend a short amount of time--perhaps ten or fifteen minutes--writing anything of their choosing: a letter, a poem, a personal diary or journal entry, notes to one another, a sketch, an invented dialogue, a stream-of-consciousness piece, a joke, or the like. . . . Two keys to the success of this writing activity are (1) that the teacher also writes and (2) that sometimes an outsider (principal, counselor, community leader) is invited into the classroom to write with students" (16).

10. Writing To Evaluate

"At the end of a week or a grading term, teachers can invite students to evaluate their learning over a period of time. Students can ask themselves such questions as: What have I learned? What has been most interesting to me? What has been most useful or valuable to me? How well have I performed? What must I do differently in order to do better? Where have I fallen short, and why? What interferes with my learning, and how can I control the factors which interfere? What do I need to stimulate me to do my best" (16)?

REFERENCES FOR FURTHER READING

Barr, Mary, Pat D'Arcy, and Mary K. Healy. What's Going On: Language/Learning Episodes in British and American Classrooms, Grades 4-13. Upper Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton/Cook, 1982.

Mayher John S., Nancy B. Lester, and Gordon M. Pradl. Learning to Write: Writing to Learn. Upper Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton/Cook, 1983.

Wolfe, Denny and Robert Reising. Writing for Learning in the Content Areas. Portland, Maine: J. Weston Walch, 1983.

ADDITIONAL COPIES

Single copies of this brochure can be obtained by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Writing Brochure, c/o Herb Thompson, Neff Education Center, Emory & Henry College, Emory, VA 24327. Parents, teachers, and other school personnel are encouraged to make copies of this brochure for use with local groups.

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